

A Life Away from Campus *living simply but purposefully*

By Bailey Robbins >> Features Editor



A few years ago, Johnny Ruhl sat in the quad for a couple hours before a single person would approach him. Like he does now, he toted a bag that read, "If you have any questions about Christianity, please ask." Today, he never sits alone.

"Now, people go by, and they'll see that there is always somebody there," he said smiling softly as his silver beard hugged the shape of his face. "I'm sure most of the campus still thinks that I'm a homeless guy that sits out in front of the library, but of those who pay attention, I think very few of them think that. It took a while, once there were students there, it gave permission to come and talk."

He didn't just stumble upon the university, and sit down in the quad. In the late 60s, Ruhl was a student of animal science before switching to sociology. By 1970, he dropped out as a junior. Though, he has had many experiences since leaving, Ruhl still considers the campus to be the beginning of his life expedition.

The journey of living simply

About 40 years ago, Ruhl's father purchased 223 acres of land for \$79 each. Though a significant chunk of it has been sold now, Ruhl still lives off the land as modestly and mindfully as he did then.

Somewhere between Woodbury and Murfreesboro, Ruhl whittles away at a piece of wood near the foot of his gravel driveway. It's an unfamiliar setting to those who know him from sitting in the quad. Here, he resides atop a wooded hill where there is no sound of students walking briskly to class or bikes zipping by, just the sound of trees swaying in the gentle breeze.

"I can find people, that's not a problem," he said softly. "I can find pavement. I can find cities. It's finding quiet that's a lot harder. So, I would rather live in the quiet and have to search for people than live in the city and be searching for quiet."

Aside from the symphony of crickets and the occasional croak of a frog, Ruhl's home remains relatively quiet. He lives there without electricity, computers, television sets or cellphones. He heats his home with a fireplace and illuminates dark rooms by flashlight or candlelight. The telephone is the only other link to Ruhl, but it is about a quarter mile from his home inside of an old barn he built.

"I come down here every morning between 6:30 and 7:00," he said facing the wooden building. "This is my connection to the outside world."

The trek

Though he doesn't connect with the world electronically, he still connects with it physically.

By the age of 18, Ruhl had lived 16 different places. His father was in the Army, so he and his three siblings had to grow accustomed to making new friends and adapting to different cultures.

"Living in so many cultures and having to always be the stranger certainly somehow affected me," he said thoughtfully. "I tell people you don't become



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a strange adult without being a strange child. I didn’t understand people.”

Ruhl lived through the 60s and 70s when understanding people’s motives and learning to harmonize with others was significant. During that time, President John

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F. Kennedy had been assassinated, President Richard Nixon had lied and the National Guard killed Kent State University protesters.

Because of this, Ruhl and his generation felt that the elected leaders were not doing their job. He then left in search for guidance where he eventually hitchhiked more than 40,000 miles.

“It was really just that feeling like, ‘We got to do this ourselves, because we can’t trust the people that are in charge,’” he recalled. “So that was when I decided to go out and see if I could find what was real. And, along with that I rejected the church. There was no power that was evident in Christianity, we were looking for something real ... So, I wasn’t looking for Christianity when I found it.”

Back where he started

Though the scenery has changed significantly since he last attended the university, Ruhl still manages to walk the same grounds with the same quiet demeanor – except now, not only does he sit in front of the library sharing his life findings, he also teaches a course.

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“It’s interesting,” Ruhl said. “I’m teaching a class that I’m paying to take.”

Ruhl is currently enrolled in a backpacking course, but after the instructor quit, he took over the role of teaching. So, once a week, Ruhl and students venture away from

campus to various hiking trails, where he shares his outdoor knowledge.

Though he isn’t being compensated for it, Ruhl doesn’t display any resentment toward the fact, because he loves to teach.

“If you search for something for a long time, and you get to the point where you have given up looking for it – and then you find it – you should want to share it with people,” he said about his hitch hiking experiences. “And, I really did.”

He is there, not to approach, but to be approached. As Ruhl sits upon the bricked stadium seating of the quad, students see a familiar face or sign of interest and sit down. There he converses about the many miles and cultures he has encountered, and shares any answers to questions students might have about his travels or life itself.

Photos by Bailey Robbins.